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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Twenty-third session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 594th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 13 January 2000, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mrs. OUEDRAOGO

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GE.00-40300 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 6) (continued)

Initial report of Sierra Leone (continued) (CRC/C/3/Add.43; CRC/C/Q/SIE/1: written replies of the Government of Sierra Leone to questions raised in the list of issues (document with no symbol distributed in the meeting room in English only))

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Sierra Leone resumed their places at the Committee table.

2. Mr. RABAH said he was very concerned about the quality of teaching since, according to the information available, 70 per cent of teachers were not qualified, parents and pupils received no financial help with school fees, and the enrolment rate for girls was extremely low, even at primary level; he asked what the Government intended to do to remedy the situation. He also wished to know whether any rehabilitation programmes had been set up for children who had been involved in armed conflicts; in that connection, he would also like to know if the phenomena of sexual exploitation of children and drug addiction among children could be attributed to the civil war. Lastly, why had the State party not ratified ILO Conventions No. 138, on the minimum age, and No. 182, on the worst forms of child labour?

3. Mrs. MOKHUANE welcomed the laudable efforts of the Government to solve health problems, particularly through the launching of vaccination programmes. However, much remained to be done, particularly given the inadequacy of health facilities, chronic malnutrition - which would require the setting up of food supply programmes - the disparities between urban and rural areas in health matters, the high maternal mortality rate, and housing problems. She was glad to see that there were programmes for the prevention of HIV and AIDS, but wondered whether there were also programmes to prevent the stigmatization of and discrimination against AIDS sufferers and people who were HIV-positive.

4. According to external sources, the principle of free and compulsory primary education was not respected in Sierra Leone. For example, it appeared that children not wearing school uniform because their parents could not afford to buy one had been turned away. Moreover, only private schools appeared to be equipped to receive disabled children. Outside information sources also seemed to contradict the delegation's assertion that the first two years of schooling took place in the children's mother tongue. Lastly, she noted that the lack of statistics made the Committee's task very difficult.

5. Mrs. El GUINDI asked whether steps had been taken to prevent certain traditional practices - particularly female genital mutilation - that damaged the health of children, to reduce the infant mortality rate, which was currently the highest in the world, and to improve primary health care.

6. Mrs. KARP asked if there existed, or there were plans to set up, on the one hand, centres where adolescents could go for advice on typical adolescent problems, particularly with regard to contraception, and, on the other, specialized hospital facilities for children with mental problems.

7. Did the school curriculum cover the rights of the child and peace studies, human rights and human dignity?

8. According to outside information sources, children deprived of their liberty were locked up in the same places as adult prisoners: she would like to know whether there was a mechanism whereby children could lodge a complaint if their right to be held separately from adults was violated. Lastly, did prison staff and police officers receive any training on how to deal with children, particularly in sensitive situations such as cases of sexual abuse?

9. Mrs. RILANTONO said she was concerned to read in paragraph 50 of the initial report that around 95 per cent of the population were unaware of the constitutional duty to ensure the proper control and upbringing of children, and asked what had been done to bring that provision to the public's attention and to change the traditional view of the child in Sierra Leonean society.

10. The CHAIRPERSON joined Mrs. El Guindi in condemning traditional practices that were harmful to the health of children and asked whether the State party was participating in the regional initiative to put an end to female circumcision. Moreover, since traditional medicine and drugs were no doubt being used more than ever in Sierra Leone as it was emerging from a long period of war, and since they could have harmful effects, particularly if taken in high doses, was the State party doing anything to reduce the dangers? Lastly, had it launched any programmes to promote breastfeeding and family planning?

11. She welcomed the setting up by the State party, as part of its reconstruction efforts, of counselling programmes for children exposed to the war, while noting that it was also necessary to ensure that steps were taken to avoid a cycle of retaliation, that professionals working with children were trained in the principles of the Convention and that the necessary action was taken to remove the anti-personnel mines scattered around the territory.

12. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) said that the shortage of teachers was not due to the lack of training facilities. In fact, the country had six teachers' training colleges, five of which trained primary teachers. The shortage revealed by the statistics was explained by the exodus of teachers during the war, and they were expected to return.

13. Mrs. JUXON-SMITH (Sierra Leone) said that rehabilitation programmes for children traumatized by the war had been set up with the help of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Children taken into care for that reason were examined to assess the after-effects from which they were suffering and to determine in what kind of institution they could best be placed. The ultimate objective was, of course, to reintegrate them in the community once they had been helped with their psychological problems. The process was long and difficult and sometimes resisted by the children, but some success had already been achieved.

14. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) said that the war had been a factor in driving children to turn to drugs. Before the conflict, drug addiction had been very localized and not very widespread. A cabinet committee had recently been set up to consider ways of combating that growing plague. The committee was chaired by the Minister of the Interior and attended by representatives of the ministries of health and education and various non-governmental

organizations (NGOs). Measures had been taken to attack the problem at source: the Government was using various incentives to encourage cannabis-growers to plant substitute crops.

15. Mrs. JUXON-SMITH (Sierra Leone) added that many NGOs were carrying out preventive work with children, including visits to schools to talk about the harmful effects of drugs. At the same time, inspections and crackdowns were being carried out by the police.

16. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) admitted that the statistics on child labour were alarming but pointed out that it was difficult to enforce legislation on the minimum age in an essentially agrarian economy where, by tradition, all family members worked in the fields.

17. The authorities were determined to restore the previous levels of vaccination coverage, which had been at 75 per cent before the war; they had therefore launched a campaign for vaccination against poliomyelitis in December 1999. Three hospitals were functioning in Freetown. Workshops on reproductive health were organized for midwives and traditional practitioners with a view to reducing maternal mortality. The number of HIV-infected people in Sierra Leone was relatively low, but the authorities were keen to prevent the epidemic from spreading and had called on religious leaders to take over the awareness-raising campaign in different parts of the country. They were also trying to oppose the practice of female circumcision while respecting the customs and traditions of the people.

18. Much of the work to help farmers before the war had been completely cancelled out by the rebels. International organizations had played a big part in supplying foodstuffs to rural populations and the Government was trying to increase the self-sufficiency of those populations by distributing seed to them.

19. The schooling of children, particularly those who had been displaced because of the conflict, still posed major problems. Teachers had been encouraged to work in teams, teaching half of the children in the morning and the other half in the afternoon. Most of the schools in Sierra Leone were State-run. Teaching was in English but classes were also given in the various regional languages. An educational adviser was to be provided for each school and adolescents had access to appropriate guidance. Moreover, the National Human Rights Commission had developed a course of peace studies that was given in schools and a textbook on peace studies had been widely distributed to communities in the country. Lastly, it was planned to integrate the principles of the Convention in the school curriculum.

20. Mrs. JUXON -SMITH (Sierra Leone) said that juvenile offenders were tried by special courts and placed in separate prisons. However, there were some gaps in the judicial procedures applicable to minors. For example, minors were not always tried as quickly as they should be and children who were arrested were sometimes held in custody by the police. Unfortunately, some parts of the child protection network set up by NGOs to ensure that no child stayed in a police station had broken down as a result of the war and its work was currently focused on the western region of the country.

21. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) said that domestic sexual violence, including incest, was the subject of strong social disapproval and was therefore not very widespread. Children rarely complained about being subjected to violence in the home.

22. Around 95 per cent of the population did not know the Convention existed and activities to publicize it at the beginning of the 1990s had had to be abandoned because of the war; the Sierra Leonean Government was seeking help in that area from the international community and the Committee in particular. However, domestic legislation did contain provisions to punish violators of children's rights.

23. The authorities were trying to reduce reliance on traditional medicine and to ensure that all citizens had access to a health centre within less than 10 kilometres of their home.

24. Mrs. JUXON-SMITH (Sierra Leone) said that malnutrition among women often made breastfeeding difficult but a programme to encourage breastfeeding was running in the country's hospitals and food supplements were distributed to mothers.

25. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) said that the Government was putting the emphasis on family planning programmes that encouraged people to have fewer children so that the rights of each child, particularly the right to education, could be better assured. Since the signing of the peace agreements, a wide-ranging national reconciliation campaign had been launched and courses on democracy and human rights had been prepared for schools. The authorities were also busy de-mining the territory on the basis of information supplied by the rebels on the location of anti-personnel mine fields.

26. Mrs. KARP stressed that human rights education, particularly in the case of the rights of the child, was a complex task for which teachers had to be trained; the preparation of school textbooks was not enough. In that respect, she asked whether the Sierra Leonean authorities intended to organize workshops on how to teach the rights of the child. Given that teachers' salaries were very low, she would like to know whether measures had been taken to encourage teachers to go to the regions where they were most badly needed.

27. On the question of violence within the family, she asked how support was given to children who were victims of such violence and whether there were refuges for battered wives and a law to punish marital violence - which often went hand-in-hand with violence against children.

28. Was it true that juvenile offenders were only tried by special courts up to the age of 17, and not 18 as required by the Convention? Were there any plans to raise the age of criminal responsibility, which was currently 10 years?

29. Mr. DOEK asked whether children awaiting trial received legal assistance and, if so, on what conditions. He also wished to know if there were any checks on the behaviour of the police towards street children and if any attempt was made to establish a distinction between abandoned children and young offenders. Lastly, what became of orphans, particularly those who were not placed in foster families?

30. Mrs. MOKHUANE asked whether measures had been taken to meet the psychological, social and emotional needs of adolescents, and whether such services were to be provided in schools. She would also like to know more about the situation with regard to suicide.

31. Mrs. EL GUINDI stressed that the Government should take the lead in eliminating harmful practices such as female circumcision and in changing people's attitudes.

32. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) said that the Government needed outside help to organize training activities. Arrangements had been made to train teachers and raise their awareness. Their salaries had been increased and compensation should again be paid to those working in remote regions.

33. With regard to incest, criminal sanctions were reinforced by public opprobrium. Special training activities were going to be organized, including on the reception of sexually abused children. Moreover, violence in couples, and more particularly violence against women, was condemned and discouraged both by the State and by society.

34. Mrs. JUXON-SMITH (Sierra Leone) said it was still rare for women to admit they were the victims of violence. However, attitudes were beginning to change and some women were lodging complaints, especially when they were injured. Efforts had been made to raise awareness in that area.

35. Legislation on juvenile justice was in conformity with the provisions of the Convention. Children under the age of 18 were taken before a children's court. As for the age of criminal responsibility, which was set at 10 years because it was thought that a child of that age was able to understand the difference between lies and the truth, the possibility of raising it could be envisaged.

36. Orphanages did exist but the Government tried to limit the number of them as it preferred to have children placed in foster families. Also, it had been found that several of those establishments had exaggerated the number of children in their care so as to take unfair advantage of the distribution of food rations. Nonetheless, there were few children in orphanages and everything was done to find foster families.

37. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) said that adolescents had free access to medical services in schools. Suicide did not appear to be common.

38. The Government considered female circumcision to be an abominable practice in many respects and many people no longer subscribed to it; the custom would eventually be eradicated thanks to a common desire to move towards a better future.

39. Mrs. JUXON-SMITH (Sierra Leone) confirmed that children had the right to legal assistance. Where minor offences were concerned, the matter was dealt with in the family. In more serious cases, when the matter went to court, the child was assisted by a counsel and the Office of Social Affairs followed the trial. As for children arrested in the street, a distinction was made between those who could return to their family environment and real street children.

40. The CHAIRPERSON asked what steps had been taken to let the general public know about the delegation's appearance before the Committee at the current session and whether the content of the discussions would be made public before the concluding observations were published.

41. Mrs. KARP said that, with regard to female circumcision, Sierra Leone could follow the example of Nigeria, where traditional ceremonies were still held but the act of circumcision itself was not practised. She asked where adolescents not attending school could turn for advice.

42. Mrs. RILANTONO asked what progress had been made in health-service reform and whether the vaccination campaign would make satisfactory coverage possible.

43. The CHAIRPERSON asked what steps the Government intended to take to help children not able to attend school, especially to stop them from getting into trouble because they had nothing to do.

44. Mrs. HOWARD (Sierra Leone) said that the NGOs who had helped to prepare the report had carried out some awareness-raising activities, including in weekly programmes on national radio, which unfortunately did not cover the whole country. Other activities were going to be organized in schools.

45. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) said that, given the time available, there had been very little publicity about the delegation's trip and that budgetary constraints had prevented more representatives from ministries from making the trip. In any case, the delegation would make sure that the outcome of the discussions was reported when it returned home.

46. Children not attending school were either busy helping their parents on the farm or else receiving occupational training. Moreover, there were plenty of role models in society for children to follow, and they usually turned to their elders (parents, employers) for advice.

47. As for health-sector reform, the country had a comprehensive policy, which was being implemented within the framework of a national programme of action supported by the World Bank. Medical services had been completely restructured and representatives of the World Bank had come to assess the needs and determine what action should be taken.

48. A committee that included parliamentarians, former ministers and representatives of international organizations such as UNICEF had been set up to promote the national vaccination campaign. High-profile awareness-raising activities were being organized, and the Head of State, ministers and former rebel leaders, in a spirit of solidarity, took part in them.

49. Mrs. JUXON-SMITH (Sierra Leone) said that programmes for youngsters not attending school were provided by NGOs and ministries in various communities.

50. Mrs. MOKHUANE asked for information on the decentralization of services.

51. The CHAIRPERSON asked how the Convention was perceived, particularly with regard to the need to make the child a subject of law, and if the provisions of the Convention could be easily incorporated in legislation.

52. Mr. BRIMA (Sierra Leone) replied that it should not be a problem, as recent experience showed that the country needed such legislation. In that connection, many mechanisms had been set up to defend the rights of all persons, not just children, including a commission for democracy and human rights. Generally speaking, the Convention had been welcomed in the country as many of its provisions were in line with the way of thinking, cultural traditions, legislation and Constitution of the country. Moreover, the Government was trying to revamp local government, as it was aware of the need to decentralize services, including in the areas of health, education and counselling.

The meeting was suspended at 4.55 p.m. and resumed at 5.05 p.m.

53. Mr. RABAH encouraged the Sierra Leonean Government to work on rebuilding infrastructure and institutions, communicating with children and giving them confidence in the educational system, amending the laws so as to change people's way of thinking and establishing coordination between the various ministries concerned. The Government should decentralize and guarantee the provision of children's services.

54. He expressed concern about discrimination against women and girls. With regard to juvenile justice, it was important to separate young offenders from adults in prisons. The Government should seek alternatives to prison for them. Judges, lawyers and social workers should receive training in the form of meetings or workshops on children's rights, as children were in fact society's victims.

55. Mr. FULCI said that the international community as a whole had an important duty towards the children of Sierra Leone. As President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, he had revived the proposal for the United Nations to set up a recovery programme for Sierra Leone similar to the one for Haiti, in order to ensure the effective coordination of measures taken by the Government and various organizations.

56. Once peace was restored to Sierra Leone, the Government should start work on three major tasks: firstly, it should ensure the social rehabilitation of kidnapped children, resolve the problem of children who did not know who their families were and take care of young children who had had a hand amputated. Obviously, the international community would support those efforts. Secondly, in the area of education, the vast majority of children who wanted to go to school should be enabled to do so. Lastly, more basic health services should be provided for children, since, along with education, health was one of the driving forces behind any national development policy.

57. Mrs. MOKHUANE welcomed the Government's efforts to implement the Convention despite the particularly difficult economic, political and social conditions in Sierra Leone. The establishment of a government of national unity was welcome.

58. It was essential for Sierra Leone to implement the Convention and the fact that quite a few emergency assistance projects and plans had been set up was definitely to be welcomed, particularly in the sectors of health, education, social welfare and juvenile justice.

59. Nevertheless, the Sierre Leonean Government would be facing some difficult tasks in all areas: promulgating laws to ensure recognition of the rights of the child, or speeding up that procedure, allocating resources to the most vulnerable groups in the population (children), coordinating services, managing and providing services, establishing a culture of respect for the rights of the child, strengthening the weak health and educational systems, bringing the juvenile justice system into conformity with the relevant provisions of the Convention, extending the participation of children, taking into account developments in children's abilities, and harmonizing the legal system with the Convention.

60. Mrs. KARP said she hoped that the peace would be lasting and that the new institutions and structures that would have to be set up would serve as a foundation for change guided by the principles of the Convention.

61. The Government should appeal to the international community for help in increasing the country's capacities in counselling, social action and infrastructure. A long-term vision would be needed once peace was restored, to set up facilities for children suffering from mental and psychological problems. In the meantime, the Government should find ways to provide psychological support to children outside the priority groups taken care of by NGOs.

62. The Government should also appeal for international help in connection with training in human rights and the rights of the child, and should turn to the various mechanisms of the United Nations system. Special training in how to deal with sexual offences should be introduced for police officers and other law-enforcement officials. Moreover, the issue of the criminal responsibility of children should be tackled from the perspective of social welfare rather than punishment.

63. Decentralization should be encouraged, as action to advance the rights of the child was more effective at the local level.

64. Mrs. RILANTONO welcomed the excellent cooperation between the Government and national NGOs, which was a very promising sign. It was important not to ignore the human aspect in the context of current and future globalization.

65. The Government should possibly go further with deregulation so that it could focus on policies, management and guidelines.

66. She recommended that a single mechanism should be set up to coordinate and manage the development and implementation of State policies in the area of the rights of the child. She encouraged the Government to consolidate its links with the various participants involved, and to draw up a cabinet-wide strategy for the protection of children.

67. Given the shortcomings of the health services, it would be necessary to repair the national health infrastructure and to ensure access for all to those services, including in rural areas.

68. The CHAIRPERSON stressed that Committee members were fully aware of the obstacles facing Sierra Leone and were confident of the Government's commitment and desire to rebuild the country and implement the Convention. She was glad to see an NGO representative in the Sierra Leonean delegation. In view of the current situation in Sierra Leone, the multidisciplinary nature of the Convention made it a tool that could make a big contribution to the development and reconstruction of the country.

69. Changing attitudes towards children should be taken into consideration by the Government, which should treat them as subjects of law. She recommended that it should pursue its activities in the psychological and social sphere, include a policy of peace and tolerance in its programme and keep democracy, respect for human rights and children at the heart of it.

70. She called upon the Government of Sierra Leone to ratify as soon as possible the amendment to article 43 of the Convention that had been adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

The meeting rose at 5.40 p.m.